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Civilizing Process

The civilizing (or civilization) process is a theory based on the very long-term development of western European societies from the medieval period to the mid-twentieth century. This long-term, developmental perspective is crucial - seen over the short-term the process may not be discernible at all. It is a blind, unplanned and continuous social process that moves in a general direction involving the shift towards a more complex, more interdependent, more differentiated, more "civilized" and less violent society. Furthermore, this process is still continuing and we ourselves form part of it. The theory links the development of nation-states and the more complex organisation of society with the development of new modes of behaviour. This is in recognition of the fact that the increasing complexity of social life goes hand-in-hand with the gradual development of a more refined standard of conduct and etiquette. Slowly, over many generations, behaviours that were once socially acceptable and part of everyday public life (e.g. the bodily functions) come to be sanctioned and treated as taboo as the social standard of manners develops, first among the upper classes and then more widely. Put simply, as the structure of society becomes more complex there is a corresponding and discernible shift in manners, culture and personality. This has implications for the study of deviance as it follows that the socially defined designation of deviant behaviours are related to the development of prevailing standards of manners and behaviour.

Thus, the social rules of manners and conduct are constantly but gradually altering in a particular direction such that what was once the norm, over time, comes to be considered deviant or transgressive (e.g. changes in table manners). The unwritten rules governing social conduct become greater and more varied alongside more formal rules derived from the state and the need to organise an increasingly complex society. These social changes are

mirrored within individuals such that behaviours falling short of the required standard of the time bring about feelings of disgust or repugnance in the observer (e.g. cruelty to animals) and shame and embarrassment in the perpetrator (e.g. nudity). In earlier societies these emotions were absent in relation to such behaviours as the development of the socially required standard of "acceptable behaviour" was different. Primary, or more animalistic, human impulses are therefore brought under self-regulation through the continuous social pressures bearing down on individuals (e.g. the threat of social degradation, loss of respect and self-respect) to the point where they are banished from consciousness. A key aspect here is that society cannot be separated from the individual. Rather, social forces are in fact forces exerted by people; forces exerted over themselves and others: social constraints become self-restraints.

The Civilizing Process is the most famous work of the German sociologist Norbert Elias who, through the detailed study of etiquette books and manuals over many centuries, charted the gradual refinement of manners in western European societies from the medieval period up to the mid-twentieth century. Crucially, these changes in human behaviour are linked to changes in wider society and particularly the increasingly complex mode of life, which requires individuals to monitor and control their behaviour in different ways and in different social settings. That is, in earlier societies people conducted their affairs in relatively closed, more homogeneous settings (e.g. the village) and social life was simpler. This development is best summarized in the words of the Dutch sociologist Joop Goudsblom: more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people.

The development of the urban mode of life leads to greater integration and the need for people to perform different functions, which in turn leads to an increase in the "webs of

interdependence" between individuals, groups and nation-states. Key processes inherent in these changes include: the division of labour; the growth of trade; urbanisation; monetarization and taxation; increasing administration; and an increasing population. Thus, the theory posits that over the very long-term western European societies are characterised by greater social interdependencies which link more and more people together from different social classes through economic and social exchange. This greater interdependency within society is accompanied by an increase in the scope for individuals and groups to identify with others and relate to each other. Very gradually, the prevailing standards of conduct of the day are built in to individuals as a "second nature" as rules and sanctions from society become sanctions within individuals and become automatic. For example, most of us in today's society know from a very early age that urinating in a public space is inappropriate but this behaviour in fact had to be learned by previous generations.

Competition and state formation are central themes of the civilising process. Competing feudal powers are gradually eliminated until one monopoly power (the state) emerges and claims a sole right to the use of violence and taxation. The internal population is then pacified through the threat of state sanctions (i.e. violence) and people are able to act with more calculation and foresight without the continued threat of violence as it gradually becomes "confined to the barracks" and behind the scenes of social life. Individuals are thus more able to restrain their behaviour. This then facilitates the division of labour, the growth of trade and other processes cited above. Competition is not only central to state formation however. Competition between classes perpetuates a continual refinement and modification of etiquette and rituals among the upper classes as they seek to distinguish themselves and their behaviour from that of the "vulgar" lower classes. These new behaviours are then disseminated more widely through greater interdependence and contact with lower classes -

first to the bourgeoisie (or middle classes) and then to the lower strata of society - who seek to emulate this behaviour. Similarly, behaviours can also be disseminated in the opposite direction bringing about a relative convergence in the standard of conduct over the long term.

Perhaps the most common criticism of the civilizing process is that it represents a progress theory which implies that western European societies are of a higher order than other societies. However, Norbert Elias was clear that his starting point, early medieval Europe, was by no means the start of civilization: no society can be considered "uncivilized" as there is no absolute beginning. In this sense it is useful to think of civilizing processes as operating at three different levels: *the individual level* involving the learning of adult standards of behaviour by children through socialization; *the particular society (or national) level* relating to the different standards of behaviour and etiquette between different cultures; *the level of humanity as a whole* which, in very long-term perspective, refers to the processes of collective learning undergone across the world such as: the development of speech; the use of fire and other energy sources; the making and use of tools etc.

Elias also stressed the fact that the civilizing process can go into reverse in a much quicker timeframe - *de*civilizing processes - and that civilizing processes are subject to counter-trends and movements. Common cited examples of decivilizing processes are often characterised by a relative loss of the capacity for individual self-control, a decline in identification with other humans and groups, and the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere. For instance, the Holocaust serves as an extreme and stark reminder that the civilizing process can indeed go into reverse in a very short space of time. Over the *long-term*, however, the general trend is towards a more "civilized" standard of manners and behaviour.

Though the civilizing process represents a study of western European nations the theoretical framework has been applied to a range of other countries including China, Russia and the United States. The theory has also been utilised in the analysis of the development of human societies in a whole range of fields including: criminology; history; international relations; organisational studies; political science and; social psychology. More recently urban scholars have begun utilising the theory and applying it in seeking an understanding of urban social relations using a long-term perspective.

Through its charting of the ever shifting standards of behaviour within human societies, the civilizing process represents a testable theoretical framework of great use to the study of deviance and the response of governments and authorities to this deviance.

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***See also*:** Civility, Etiquette, Incivility, Informalization, Manners.

Further Readings

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